

High school reunions should give out “least likely” awards

- For example, I’m thinking of my friend old Jim Kandik, who played a Jimi Hendrix song on his guitar in the 9th grade talent show—he’d get an award for being the least likely person to have a career as a classical musician
- Or Pat Woodley, who seemed to have a really good time during high school—he could be the least likely person to move to Denver and start a successful furniture business
- Not to brag or anything, but I’m pretty sure I’d be among the top candidates as the least likely person to become a pastor

Those awards would get a good laugh, but people who knew us could see things that pointed toward where we’ve ended up

- But there’s at least one person from our high school whose path in life is truly astonishing
- Norm Waite was a pretty ordinary guy—liked to tinker with electronic gadgets, I guess
- He’d win the award for the least likely person to become a billionaire—you’ve heard of Gateway Computers, right?
- And how about this guy in our Gospel story today? The way the Bible describes John, he would have been the “least likely” person in his day to draw a big crowd

Think of today’s mega-popular evangelists—Rick Warren or Joel Osteen, for example

- They have production teams and fancy auditoriums and live television coverage and best-selling books
- John the Baptizer was the complete opposite of that
- Far from being slick and appealing, he was strange and disturbing
- Instead of wearing the latest toga he turned up in ragged robes
- No power lunches for him—it was locusts and wild honey all the way—desert solitude instead of high society
- So why would anyone go out of their way to see and hear him?

And yet they did, great crowds of people “from Jerusalem and all Judea” (*Matthew 3:5*)

- In an age with no media, when all the news was spread by word of mouth, John the Baptizer was enormously popular

- He was a prophet, both in the tradition of ancient Israel and in a new and more modern way
- He reminded people of Elijah, another strange figure, who spoke the Word of God and worked amazing wonders
- John disclaimed personal powers like Elijah's, and the Word on his lips was entirely new and different
- The world is about to change in a dramatic way, he said. The one to come is like no other we've ever seen
- John challenged them to prepare the way, but the people must have wondered, How do we do that? We don't even know who's coming, or why

In some ways baptism was the most familiar and comforting part of his message

- Ritualized water baths were well-known to the Jews of that time
- Their purity code warned against contact with impure objects such as blood, unclean animals, people with skin diseases, or corpses
- Ritual washing, especially in running water, returned them to a state of purity in which they could worship with their people

But John's theology of baptism was unique for that time

- Rather than focusing on concrete impurities which needed to be washed away, John began by challenging his listeners to search their hearts and repent
- Without clarifying exactly what that meant, he used his appearance and preaching style to create a sense of high drama
- We heard him introduced by the familiar words of Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness."
- Bible translator Eugene Peterson puts it more succinctly, "Thunder in the desert!" (*The Message*)
- John came upon the people like a whirlwind, leaving them puzzled and fascinated—apparently they just couldn't stay away
- Imagine downtown office workers pouring out of their buildings to hear a street preacher on the mall—something powerful must have been happening

What meaning does John's call to repentance have today?

- Through the stages of our lives, the culture teaches us that "repent" really means "regret"

- A three-year-old regrets being called to account by a parent figure (“Say you’re sorry, Billy.” *describe the facial expressions*)
- An adult dating or courting or newly married regrets actions which might threaten the relationship, without necessarily feeling remorse over what they did
- Older people look back at their lives and regret things not seen clearly at the time, turning points which might have gone the other way

John the Baptizer speaks to us out of a different culture and time, and what he means by repentance is entirely different from regret

- Eugene Peterson writes in one of his books that repentance is “the turning point marking the transition from a dreamy nostalgia for a better life to a rugged pilgrimage of discipleship in faith.” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 28)
- He goes on to say, “Repentance is not an emotion. It is not feeling sorry for your sins. It is a decision. It is deciding that you have been wrong in supposing that you could manage your own life and be your own god.” (p. 29, *emphasis added*)

The best current example I can think of to illustrate this point is Alcoholics Anonymous

- There are plenty of alcoholics who regret their habit, sometimes while they’re having another drink
- But without a change of life, those regrets amount to no more than the “dreamy nostalgia” Peterson refers to
- The second and third of the twelve steps affirm belief in a higher power and the decision “to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God”
- The rest of the steps lay out a process for making positive life changes
- Do you see how well that embodies the biblical meaning of repentance?

John the Baptizer arrived on the scene like “thunder in the desert,” stirring up the people and calling them to “prepare the way of the Lord”

- His words today demand from us something more than saying we’re sorry and trying to do better

- He is challenging us to change our lives and “bear fruit worthy of repentance”
- If we want to grow spiritually and do more to help the needy and deepen our connections with each other, we’re going to need help
- Unless we’re ready to “turn our will and our lives over to the care of God,” we’ll be stuck right where we are

Fortunately, help is on the way—the best we could ever hope for

- If our dreams seem far away and hard to achieve, remember that in the midst of the deepest darkness, God comes among us
- Once again, we need to trust that when our own resources are not sufficient, God’s abundant love and grace will provide for us
- Advent is an answer to the prayers we cannot find words to speak
- Watch and listen, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near”